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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MANILA 005018

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TAGS: PREL PINS KISL RP

SUBJECT: NUR MISUARI SIGNALS INTENT TO RUN FOR SULU GOVERNOR

REF: A. MANILA 4974
1B. MANILA 4836
1C. MANILA 4721
1D. MANILA 4656
1E. MANILA 3817

Classified By: Pol/C Scott Bellard for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary. Detained Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF) Chairman Nur Misuari registered as a voter in Jolo on December 14, and signaled his intent to run for Governor of Sulu during the May 2007 elections. Misuari, who enjoys widespread grassroots support and recognition by the Organization of Islamic Conference, remains a key part of the GRP's effort to unify the MNLF, promote dialogue between the MNLF and Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF), and overcome opposition to the creation of a Bangsamoro Juridical Entity in the Sulu Archipelago. The Arroyo Administration will face some tough choice about possibly dismissing charges against him and about whom to support for the next Sulu governor, but the likelihood is growing that Misuari will go free and could win the election. End Summary.

Misuari For Governor?

12. (SBU) MNLF Chairman Nur Misuari, still in detention and facing charges for rebellion, traveled with court permission -- for the first time since November 2001 -- from Manila to Jolo on December 14 to register as a voter and signal his intent to run for Governor of Sulu during the expected May 2007 elections. This was the sixth time this past year that the court granted him permission to leave his detention facility; he also attended the 10 year anniversary celebrations of the MNLF/GRP peace accord in Davao in September. Accompanying Misuari were his wife, a representative of the Office of the Presidential Advisor on the Peace Process, escorts from the Special Action Force, and other security personnel.

13. (SBU) GRP Peace Negotiations Panel Secretariat Director Ryan Sullivan confirmed to poloff on December 15 that Misuari planned to enter the May 2007 gubernatorial election in Sulu Province with the support of GRP officials, including House Speaker Jose de Venecia. One of Misuari's opponents in the upcoming election will likely be incumbent Governor Benjamin Loong, a staunch supporter of U.S. - GRP Balikatan exercises and civil-military projects as well as an important ally of President Arroyo.

Wanted: A Unified MNLF

14. (SBU) Sullivan said that a "buy-in" to the GRP-MILF peace

process by a unified MNLF was "ssential" for peace and security in conflict-affected areas of Mindanao and for success in integrating the ethnic Tausug-dominated Sulu Archipelago in an eventual Bangsamoro Juridical Entity (BJE) (ref a).

¶5. (C) According to Tawi-Tawi Congressman Nur Jafaar, opposition to a BJE was still "widespread" among the general populace of Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, and Basilan, as well as within factions of the MNLF under Misuari, Alvarez Isnaji, Habib Muahab Hashim, Matanog Mapandi, and the MNLF's Council of Fifteen. Since Misuari enjoyed widespread support at the grassroots level, and formal recognition as the MNLF's leader by the OIC, Jafaar noted, adding that Misuari represents the GRP's best chance for bringing about unity within the MNLF. Jafaar admitted, however, that recent disagreements among some members of Misuari's group, as well as within the Council of Fifteen, threatened to factionalize the MNLF even further.

Comment

¶6. (C) Misuari has yet to stand trial on charges of rebellion. While there is popular support in parts of Mindanao for Misuari's release from detention, the rampant corruption, fraud, and abuse that characterized his previous stint as ARMM Governor from 1996 to 2000 remain vivid in the minds of many. The Arroyo Administration will face some tough choices about possibly dismissing charges against him and about whom to support for the next Sulu governor, but the likelihood is growing that Misuari will go free and could win the election (with some help).

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